
Differentiation in Secondary Schools



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For a pupil with Down syndrome to be and to feel included in a lesson, whether in Reception or Year 11, the top set or the bottom group, the lesson **will** need to be differentiated. For the pupil to feel valued as an equal member of the class, it needs to be the class/subject teacher that does the differentiating; or at the very least there needs to be effective communication in place between the teacher and the TA, so that the TA is aware of the content of the next lesson in order to be able to prepare differentiated materials and resources.

If when the pupil and the TA arrive at a lesson, neither of them knows what to expect so that the TA must differentiate “on the hoof”, the TA’s role becomes compensatory rather than complementary. Ultimately it is the child who misses out.

Attitudes to work can be affected, which can then result in behaviour issues. The blame consequently tends to fall on the child, who is judged to be “difficult”, when in fact they are reacting to an unrealistic situation placed upon them. Teachers need to remember that the child with Down syndrome has a right to be in their class and it is they, the specialists, who should be taking ownership of the student. It is much easier not only to include but also to manage the pupil if the work expected of him/her has been suitably differentiated to meet their needs and levels.

If the work has been suitably differentiated, then the pupil should be able to complete it with relatively little 1-1 support from the TA, which frees him/her up to support other students in the room, or to prepare further resources and differentiated work for future lessons.

Communication between the teacher and the TA is key. At secondary school, if the TA is copied into each half-termly planning and scheme of work by the Subject Specialists, so that they know what is coming up, visual materials and differentiated worksheets can be prepared to enable the pupil to access the lesson and to record their knowledge and understanding.

A knowledge of the learning profile associated with students who have Down syndrome is essential.

Key Points:

- Keep it basic
- Keep it simple
- Keep it **visual**

Basically, teachers need to ask themselves the question: **What one thing do I want the pupil to get out of this lesson?**

This can be set as the learning objective for the pupil. Focus on the child learning one thing well – a single concept or key word is often enough.

Individual learning objectives should be chosen which are related to an aspect on which the whole class is working. If with appropriate access strategies and support the student cannot work towards the same learning objective as the rest of the class, teachers can track back through a progression strand to locate an earlier learning objective.

Having good links established with teachers from lower Key Stages will give the teaching staff access to programmes of study and level descriptors from earlier levels, and a wealth of resources.

Language Difficulties

Language can often be the greatest sticking point when it comes to the pupil having difficulties accessing the lesson, especially when the vocabulary is complex, abstract or unfamiliar. So, focussing on language acquisition and vocabulary building can be learning objectives in themselves.

The pupils will understand language and concepts much more easily if they are reinforced visually with pictures, diagrams, symbols and readable text. Children with Down syndrome find it harder to understand deeper meanings, and abstract and unfamiliar concepts, so relate language and concepts to familiar and meaningful experiences.

Example



In a KS3 science lesson the students were looking at and recording the effect that adding salt had on the boiling temperature of water. For the student with Down syndrome the focus of the lesson and the learning objective became understanding what the term "boiling" meant, as it was not clear that she did. So, by looking closely at how the water changed appearance the closer it got to boiling point, making a cup of tea, boiling peas, and recording her findings in pictorial form the student understood a new concept and learned a new word, whilst having a direct link to the content of the lesson for the rest of the class.

Writing Difficulties

The vast majority of pupils with Down syndrome will have fine motor, speech and language, short term memory and processing difficulties. These interact with each other and can cause great difficulties in their ability to process, remember, sequence and record information.

However, it is essential that the pupils develop language, thinking, sentence construction and writing as a skill as **independently** as possible, depending on the level of the individual child. One sentence structured and written or recorded as independently as possible is much often more worthwhile than a paragraph of copied words which carries little meaning or understanding.

If concept learning is the object of a particular lesson, then look for ways to record that knowledge other than by necessarily writing it down. Often, the effort required in getting the letter formation right, or staying on the line, or keeping it neat, uses the child's short-term memory and he/she forgets what they are supposed to be writing so the content is lost. Keep writing as an objective and separate from recording knowledge.

Cloze procedure, multiple choice, matching answers to questions are all valid alternatives to writing. Having a words folder is another very effective resource that many pupils are comfortable with and enjoy using. The folder opens out to reveal a bank of words with which the pupil can then use to build sentences.

Some Important Points to Remember

- Praise achievement in an age-appropriate way.
- Consider fine motor difficulties and short-term memory problems.
- Start simply and build up.
- Have short sessions with plenty of breaks.
- Group the pupil with peers and use them as support.
- Provide alternative means of recording and lots of visual prompts.
- Focus on the child learning one thing well – a single concept or key word.
- Consider language difficulties by using simpler vocabulary and providing visual support. Use the curriculum to teach new vocabulary.
- Children with Down syndrome are visual and kinaesthetic learners, so **keep it hands on and visual**.

Some Common Pitfalls

- Too much writing expected.
- Too much talking.
- Overloading and multi-tasking.
- Having too low expectations.
- Worksheets which are too busy and too complicated.

Worksheets

In preparing worksheets for a pupil with Down's syndrome the following tips may be helpful.

- Use meaningful material within or close to the pupil's experience.
- Introduce new concepts in a familiar context.
- Make the tasks self-contained.
- Provide plenty of visual clues: words, symbols, pictures, diagrams.

- Ensure illustrations tie in closely with text and task. Avoid overuse of writing with symbols.
- If possible, try out several different versions of the same worksheet to discover what works best for the individual pupil.
- Leave a wide border all around the edge of the page.
- Highlight and explain key words and any that are new to the pupil.
- Illustrate key words if possible.
- Use type or print, not handwriting.
- Use subheadings to break down and structure the written sheet.
- Use a simple uncluttered layout. Too busy a page causes confusion.
- Break up continuous text. Highlight instructions in some way: in a box, particular font or colour.
- Use coloured as well as white paper, both for variety and to help the pupil distinguish one subject area from another.
- Use simple and familiar language. Keep sentences short and concise.
- Avoid ambiguous words. Use active rather than passive verbs.

Further support

Our School Liaison Service can provide further advice and support. Contact us by emailing: info@upsanddowns.net